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Music

SLASH

A History Of A Brief Scene

by Bella Jones

One afternoon in April 1977, Claude Bessy rolled out of bed and landed on a stack of xeroxed leaflets called "Angeleno Dread" that he'd stapled together at dawn. He had barely enough change from his tips as a waiter on the Santa Monica Pier to scrape his reggae fanzine together, but some people are seized by passions and, at a time when few in L.A. had even heard of Bob Marley, Bessy was sabotaging turntables at parties with records by Burning Spear and Lee Perry, and muttering indecipherable phrases about dreadlocks and "rat safaris" in his thick French accent.

He grabbed the nearest pair of sunglasses and eased over toward his turntable. An English friend of his had given him some new records: the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K.," the Clash's "1977" and a Damned album. Claude wasn't sure if he liked the music yet. The crude three-chord rock songs were faster and more frenzied than any music he'd heard except maybe a solo by a really cracked jazzbo. The lyrics, what he could make out of them, were youth party rantings: "No Elvis, Beatles or Rolling Stones in 1977!"

Claude's friend, Steve Samiof, had showed him an L.A. *Times* item about the Sex Pistol Sid Vicious' notorious nausea in Heathrow Airport. Claude decided to take a bus over to the studio in which Steve pasted up *The Watts Star Review* and *The Herald Dispatch*, play his records and discuss Samiof's idea for an article about English punk rock for a local magazine. Talking, they decided to start their own publication instead.

In May 1977, *Slash* magazine was born. At the time, there were no punk bands playing in L.A., and Claude, his girlfriend

Philomena, Steve and photographer Melanie Nissen had to scrounge for material for the first issue. Steve persuaded some record companies to buy dirt cheap advertising space in a "new rock music paper" and scored $400. By chance, they got an interview with the Damned when they came to Hollywood. They also plugged the Screamers, whose music they'd never heard. The women took some photos. And Claude, now as wild about punk music as reggae, named himself Kickboy Face (after a Jamaican singer) and churned out a couple of reviews and an introductory editorial:

...There will be no objective reviewing in these pages and definitely no unnecessary dwelling upon the bastards who've been boring the living shit out of us for years with their concept albums, their cosmic discoveries and their pseudo-philosophical inanities. Enough is enough, partner! About time we squeezed the pus out and sent the filthy rich old farts of rock'n'roll to retirement homes in Florida where they belong...

Kickboy Face
"So This Is War, Eh?"

Then the Damned played the Starwood, and waves of shattered hippies ran screaming back to their canyons. Was L.A. ready for this? Those remaining in the audience looked long and hard at one another. They would meet again at Samiof's home/studio/*Slash* office, which became punk central. Neighbor Paul Zacha uncovered a group of artsy hicks from Ohio who called themselves Devo, and at their *Slash* welcoming party, people listened to English punk records and met other locals who couldn't stand the sound of one more snarly-haired guitarist's whining love bummers. During those hot summer nights, over piles of beer cans in a black ghetto alley, L.A.'s punk bands began forming.

Three years back, no one was quite sure what was going on, and it took a bit of wit to convince the faithful that this punk stuff was actually a cultural revolution. Minister of chaos, Kickboy, waving the *Slash* bible, defined or negated the punk party line in his monthly editorials, making sure those feeling too cozy in their new niche would remain in a constant but inspired state of identity crisis. Anyone caught clinging to the past was skewered with sharp quills from *Slash* writers. Many contributors were in bands, too, like Craig Lee (Bags, Catholic Discipline) and Chris D. (Flesheaters). Phast Phreddie and "Ranking" Jeffrey Lea (experts in R&R and R&B esoterica) became singers in the Precisions and Gun Club, respectively. Many ot the original writers like Will Amato and V are still contributing, but Alan MacDonnell (Basho Macko) disappeared to write novels.

Like it or not, *Slash* has had more influence than it had any right to have. Long term friendships have blossomed and vendettas have been declared because of a single *Slash* review. In the beginning, snide detractors called it a Venice Beach art project and said it wouldn't last three issues. But circulation has risen to 20,000 (though the magazine has gone from a monthly to a quarterly), and the mailman now delivers poison pen letters from all over the world.

Steve, Melanie, Claude and Philly did all the dirty work in the early days — proofreading, licking stamps, addressing thousands of envelopes and cleaning up after reckless parties. It was a Mom and

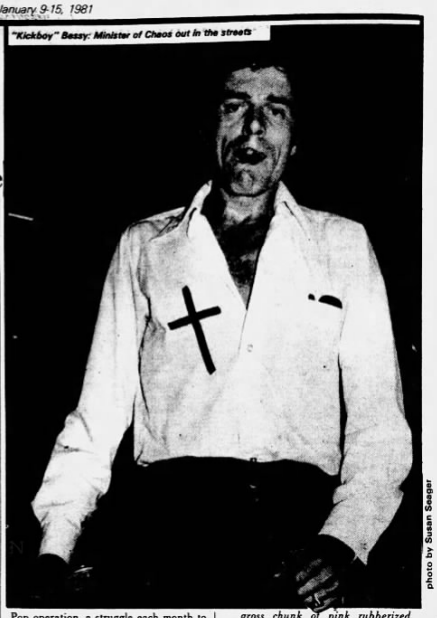
"Kickboy" Bessy: Minister of Chaos out in the streets

photo by Susan Seeger

Pop operation, a struggle each month to keep the magazine afloat and stomachs filled. Money to support the magazine came in odd ways. In one ironic stroke of luck, a Hollywood casting agent "discovered" Claude as he was guzzling a swiped bottle of champagne at a birthday party. Claude landed the role of a rock star called Frenchy in a two-part *Hardy Boys* episode, playing tambourine alongside MOR tunesmiths Paul Williams and Bernie Taupin!

Other money came from a Samiof brainstorm: historic *Slash* benefit concerts were held with rosters of L.A.'s best punk bands vying for the chance to blow out their amps in Larchmont Hall in one of the city's most staid neighborhoods. Such bands as the Deadbeats, the Alley Cats, the Skulls and the Controllers donated their sets to *Slash* at the Masque, the legendary dungeon cabaret started by Scotch musician Brendan Mullen in the Pussycat Theatre basement off Hollywood Boulevard.

In 1978 there was a development that led to another *Slash* episode. When the Sex Pistols broke up (after amassing voluminous publicity and $1 million), the three-letter record conglomerates, trying to snag a piece of punk action, created the antiseptic New Wave concept and the first major schism in the new music scene. Mass media declared punk rock dead, and bands changed colors like chameleons. Blondie went disco, and the Clash, anesthetized by fame, softened its hard edge. Cold synthesizer emissions, abstract cerebral jive and hot pink fashion trendiness displaced the passion of the rebellion. Record moguls funneled audiences over to New Wave with pretty packaging and clean production values. *Slash* declared war:

...Well, suckers here's something you can stash away in your spandex tights, something which, like a gross chunk of pink rubberized bubble gum fresh out of the sore ridden mouth of some minority kid, you can stick in your perky little pony tail: we ain't it, we don't buy it, we don't believe it, we don't identify with it, we don't dance to it, and we don't like you. No matter how much money you gonna spend on your hip wardrobe, what records you gonna spin at your next party and what platitudes you gonna mouth the next time we run into each other in some neutral kitchen. Just because Cashworld (sorry, Cashbox), New West, Rolling Stone, Newsweek, Fortune and my mom's diary have us all linked together like sausages on their way to the deep fryer, Slash Cash Clash Crash (Darby) Splash (Media) Don't you lash unto appearances like that, it is not that way at all...

Kickboy Face
"Fuck the New Wave"

Meanwhile, with major record labels shunning hard core punk bands, tiny labels formed and an onslaught of cheaply produced 45s from all over the country arrived daily at the *Slash* office. *Slash* itself moved in to fill the gap, immortalizing on vinyl its favorite local band, the Germs, whose lead singer/lyricist Darby Crash , who recently died, was noted for writing lengthy songs with four-syllable words, spitting them out as rapidly as possible and cutting himself with beer bottles on stage. Only 1,000 lucky people were able to get their hands on the EP called "Lexicon Devil/Circle One/No God." The record was financed by artist Bob Biggs, who made videotapes and pastel drawings of babies in a studio next door to the *Slash* office. At first, Biggs was nervous about the spikeyheads hanging around, but when he heard the Germs tape, he was smitten. Biggs also became publisher of *Slash*, revamping its

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